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EGYPTIAN ART.
Old Kingdom Sculpture. 3000-2400 B. C.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BOSTON

GALLERY BOOK

1st ed
May 14, 1921

OLD KINGDOM SCULPTURE. SECRETARY

3000 - 2400 B. C.

For an appreciation of Egyptian Art it is essential to know something of the reasons which caused its production - to understand its purpose. The purpose of modern art is the representation of truth or beauty, the expression of a mood, or, as Tolstoi says 'to communicate emotion'. In its original conception, the art of sculpture in Egypt was quite different. The whole life and artistic expression of the ancient Egyptian was dominated by the idea of the next world, by his conception of the future life. After the death of the body a man's soul continued to live, provided conditions were right. This soul was conceived of as a shadowy being of a form identical with the earthly body, but of an ethereal substance invisible to human eyes. This shadow self, or ka, as the Egyptian called it, resided in the body, and lived a life differing in no wise from that of the man on earth. It too required above all things food, drink, clothing, and shelter, all the things which were essential to life and a happiness in this world. But this shadow world in which the shadow self was to live eternally was a world of magic, a world where pictures and models became endowed with a shadow reality, and where the recitation of charms was as effective as material acts in this world. Should the ka of the noble buried in

an Old Kingdom tomb become hungry, the pictures of every kind of food depicted on its walls would become real food, and it could eat its fill, with the advantage that the pictures remained and furnished an inexhaustible supply. Should the pictured viands there set forth prove unacceptable, long lists of other foods, and of "every good thing" were written up, and these served the same purpose. The tomb itself was the house of the ka, built with all the skill at the maker's command and without stint of expense, to endure forever. The kings erected the vast Pyramids, requiring the labor of many tens of thousands of their subjects for long years, and the straining of the whole country's resources to the limit, with the sole object of making them everlasting houses for the ka, and lesser men did likewise, each to the limit of his ability and wealth.

But more important than all else - the ka must have a body, just as must the living man. Without it the shadow self would be condemned to eternal homeless wanderings, a fate as horrible as any later conception of Hell. The human body was naturally the most proper home for the ka, but this soon decayed and lost all personality, even when it did not utterly fall to dust. Even the mummies of the great and wealthy were seen to be subject to decay and to damage by plunderers seeking treasure, and at best, the bandaged mass preserved but an imperfect resemblance to its former self. Also the mummy was

unique - an important consideration - what a terrible hazard to pin one's chances of eternal happiness upon that one imperfect body! Stone and wood in the dry climate of Egypt, when sheltered from the attacks of wind blown sand, seemed to be everlasting, and there was no reason why artificial bodies in these materials might not be multiplied indefinitely, thus multiplying the safeguards against eventual homelessness for the ka. How wise such reasoning was, given the Egyptian's beliefs, we may clearly see in this room. Of all the royal and noble people who surround us, not one physical body remains - all their mummies have crumbled to dust long ago, but their individualities, their kas, still live content, for these bodies which they caused to be made for them still survive and serve their purpose, after nearly 5000 years.

This then, was the main purpose of Old Kingdom sculpture in Egypt. It follows from this purpose that the status must represent the person whose ka it was made to house - it must be a portrait - and in the best work its portrait value is undoubtedly high. The more nearly it could be made to resemble the original, the more perfectly would it serve its purpose. With this end in view, color was added to form in the effort to attain realism. Now the Egyptian, although he had a remarkable sense for color harmony, was not a color realist. In the first place he did not understand light and shade as modern painters do -

he painted in flat tones and in colors designed to explain the nature of the material he was representing, rather than to imitate it. Also he had a limited range of pigments at his disposal, and did not mix them to obtain numberless variations as we do. In the Old Kingdom he used a single brick red, a blue, a green, a yellow, a brown, black and white, each used pure and in flat tones. To color his statues therefore, he followed nature within the limits of his available colors. The men, who wore no clothes beyond a short linen kilt, and whose official duties kept them much in the open, overseeing public works or inspecting their estates, were darkly tanned by the burning Egyptian sun, and were colored a brick red. The ladies living indoor lives in the harem, and doubtless prizing their complexions as much as modern eastern beauties, were pale, almost white, and the painter indicated this by painting them yellow. These colorings are not as far from the truth as our western eyes would at first suppose, for theEgyptian is of a dark skinned race, and while he burns darker under the rays of the sun than we do, his palor when not subjected to its rays, has a decidedly yellow tone. It may also be added, in explanation of this coloring, that tradition played a considerable part in the matter, and that such coloring became universal and remained so for nearly 3000 years out of respect for a time honored custom. The clothing was colored white,

being of fine bleached linen, and necklaces, bracelets, and the like were colored to represent the materials used. The eyes were either painted to imitate nature, or were inlaid in colored materials. A favorite method was to insert a rim of bronze, and a pupil of polished black stone set in white quartz. The examples where such eyes are preserved present a remarkably life-like effect. It is not clear whether all statues were so colored. We have examples in some of the naturally colored stones, such as diorite, black and red granite, and alabaster, where no trace of color can be seen, and it is possible that such statues were never intended to be painted. But we also have examples of colored stone statues which do show traces of painting, as does the slate pair, the red granite head, and the alabaster Mycerinus in this room. White limestone and wooden statues were undoubtedly intended to be painted, that much we are sure of.

As I have already pointed out the purpose which sculpture served required that it be portraiture. The resemblance to the individual man was essential if the ka were to feel at home in this stone body. But side by side with this primary consideration were others. First, the ka, during its earthly life, had inhabited the body from childhood to old age, and would therefore be as much at home in the child body as in that of the old man. As the stone body was to

serve as its home for eternity, it was manifestly important that it be as perfect a body as that of the man at the best period of his life. The child body was weak and undeveloped, that of the old man decrepit. But in youth man was at his best, and hence the bodies designed for the ka were those of men in their physical prime, or of their wives in young womanhood. What was true for the body was also true for the face, but in a somewhat different way. The individuality of a man is most clearly seen in his face, and the portrait value of a figure resides therein. In theory, of course, the face too, should be that of the man in his prime, but in order to obtain the required resemblance, the sculptor must work from the living model, and the example before him would guide him despite his purpose of making the face youthful. A striking example of this is seen in the face of the king in our Slate Pair. Here the model from which the sculptor worked was an elderly man, as proved by the fact that the statue was unfinished at the king's death. The lines of age and care have been minimised, but the sculptor dared not do more towards restoring youth to the face, lest he lose the all important likeness.

The second modifying element has to do with the stiff and unnaturally formal effect which the statues often make on modern eyes; they look rigid and angular. There are two reasons for this. In the first place

the Egyptian was and is to-day an Oriental, and the Oriental is a stoic and a lover of pomp and formality. When the modern Egyptian poses for his photograph he assumes a rigid position and his face becomes an expressionless mask. That is his conception of a dignified bearing, and it has not changed in five thousand years. As we have already seen, the statue must represent the man at his best, which meant not only his physical appearance, but an attitude of dignity (for the statues are those of important people in their world) and an expression of cheerful serenity. Many of the faces give the effect almost of a smile. While man is at his best in a dignified yet cheerful pose, women should express in addition the affectionate quality which is associated with a good wife. So we usually find her with an arm about her lord's waist or neck.

There are, I think, three more influences which modified the realism of portraits. Egypt was an Oriental despotism, where fear of the all powerful king and of the great lords who enjoyed his favor was a vital force. Furthermore the artist had but a humble place in the social scale. Under such conditions what more natural than that his every effort should be to please and flatter his patron, upon whose approval depended his fortunes, and whose slightest annoyance might mean death.

The fourth modifying influence is to be seen in the limitations imposed upon the artist by his material

and equipment, and by the necessity for permanence imposed by the guiding purpose of the work. In the harder stones the technical difficulties of the cutting imposed a certain breadth of treatment and elimination of detail, while in the softer materials, a too detailed treatment would only fade and blur in the course of centuries.

The last modifying influence lies in the necessity for avoiding fragility. Detached members run the risk of breakage, both through the hammering incidental to their manufacture, and from accidental blows thereafter. Positions had, therefore, to be chosen where arms and legs need not be detached, and we find arms at sides or in sitting figures on the knees. In walking figures, the advanced leg is not cut free, but a support is left behind to add strength. The use of large wigs and headdresses was also useful to the sculptor, as lending breadth to the support of the head; and in cases where such headdress is not represented, a block of stone extends up behind the head to minimize the risk of breakage.

We have seen the dominant motive of this art to be realism in the portrayal of an individual, and we have shown how this dominant motive was modified by certain other considerations. But we must bear in mind that the dominant motive is ever present and serves to hold in check the lesser motives. A few examples will show this clearly. There is in the Cairo Museum

a very remarkable statue of a dwarf. The man whom it represents was a nobleman and court official in the Old Kingdom. The figure has an enormous misshapen head, a fat little body, very short arms, and grotesque bandy legs. The artist confronted with such a model could not transform it into an ideal figure of a youthful man in the prime of life. If he had done so, the misshapen ka, which the figure was intended to house, would not have felt at home in it. He must maintain the individual peculiarities, even though he softened their harshness. Thus the artist has minimised the ugliness of the face and has done his best to conceal the misshapen legs by enlarging the kilt, but the essential peculiarities of the figure are not destroyed. A similar though less extreme case is that of the King Amenophis IV. Several statues and many relief figures of him are known, and they all show the same marked physical peculiarities. The head is very elongated from front to back with a sharply projecting chin, and poised on a slender neck. The body is that of a somewhat deformed invalid, with flat chest, and flabby muscles. The hips and abdomen are abnormally large. These physical peculiarities are faithfully reproduced in all the figures, despite the fact that they are far from the ideal, and solely because their suppression would have destroyed the portrait value of the work, which we have seen to be essential.

Let us take up the matter of the technical execution of these statues. We are not, unfortunately, in possession of complete evidence as to the methods employed, but we do know something about it. First there is the question of tools. We do not know whether iron was used at this time extensively, but bronze certainly was, and that the Egyptians knew how to harden this substance we also know. Modern experiments have also shown that it is quite possible to work hard stones with flint, though the process is extremely arduous and slow. The probabilities are that bronze tools were used. Leaving this point and turning to the statues themselves for further evidence, we have certain examples in the original to judge from. The Mycerinus pair in slate, and a group of unfinished statuettes in Diorite, both very hard stones, show us that such material was worked largely with the point. A series of pointed tools, varying in fineness according to the delicacy of work required, were used, which were struck with a wooden mallet, thus bruising the stone in the places where it had to be removed. The original square block was probably first cut down by sawing, using a plain bronze blade with sand and water as an abrasive. Then the master sculptor marked upon the block in red

lines the parts to be removed, and the apprentice, with a coarse point worked the piece down. This process was continued in graduated stages, constantly checked by themaster, until the human form began to emerge. As the work progressed, the tool used became finer and the blows of the mallet less vigorous, while, as greater delicacy and sureness of hand was required, the master himself took over the work. We do not know exactly how the polishing was done, probably with the aid of fine sand or emery powder, and in this process the final details were worked out, as the delicate modelings of the face, fingers and toes. The Slate Pair shows this process half completed. The royal face is finished, and has even been painted, but the lower parts are still in the chiseled stage. On the face of the queen and on the royal chest may clearly be seen the minute scratches of the earlier stages in the polishing process. An interesting question is, was not this an impossibly long and tedious way to make a statue? It might at first appear so, but Professor Maspero records an example which throws some light on the matter. Some 30 years ago an Egyptian forger of antiquities made a copy of an ancient life-size head in red granite, a very hard and difficult stone, under careful supervision. He used 20 iron (not steel) chisels, and it

took him just two weeks to finish the head. The Museum has also a small unfinished statuette in fine limestone, which is less hard than slate or diorite. Here, while the point has been used, cutting tools play their part as well, pieces are sliced or shaved off with a chisel. Probably in the softer limestones, which were so extensively employed for the statues of the nobility, the chisel was used exclusively.

It has often been claimed that the Egyptian artist had a fixed canon of proportions to guide him in the portrayal of the human body; that the relations of the different parts to one another were all fixed by unchanging rules. As far as we know there is no proof of this, and indeed the existing examples disprove it. Actual measurements of statues and reliefs show that there is constant variation in the proportions, even as between figures on a single wall executed by one hand. In one the head will be larger in proportion to the breadth of shoulder than in another, and so forth. Numerous examples are known where a sketch has been squared off for copying in a different scale, but the number of squares for the height of the figure is not constant. There are also cases of figures built up on a skeleton of lines and dots, but here again the system is not

uniform, and such work is in reality nothing more than the guiding lines laid down by a master for his pupil.

We are concerned here with the work of the royal sculptors, but there were of course lesser men as well. The peasantry and lower middle class population, without wealth or influence, must needs be content with burial in a simple grave, accompanied by such articles as they were used to in daily life. A few crude pottery vessels, a knife, a string of beads, a loaf of bread and a jar of beer, such would be the extent of the equipment which their relatives could give them. And of course a statue would be quite beyond their means. But the mediocre sculptors, those whose skill was not enough to ensure the patronage of the great nobility, still found patrons among the great army of lesser officials and petty nobility, who must have been plentiful under such a civilization as then existed. These lesser sculptors or stone cutters imitated the work of their more skilful masters; many of them perhaps had been apprentices who failed to show marked ability. The less their ability, the poorer was the portrait value of their work, and we find in the tombs figures which are

little more than crude approximations of the human form, without individuality of character. Such figures may even have been turned out wholesale, ready for the inscription of the name and titles of whoever might come to buy, such inscription giving them the individuality which they otherwise lacked, and doubtless satisfying enough to the patrons of undeveloped taste who ordered them.

Books and photographs relating to the branch of art described in this book are open to use by all visitors in the Library of the Museum, over the Huntington Avenue Entrance.

Copies of this book may be obtained at the Sales Office at the Huntington Avenue Entrance. Price: 25 cents each.